A SEARCH OF HUMAN IDENTITY: A STUDY OF ARUN JOSHI’S NOVEL “THE FOREIGNER”

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Abstract
In this novel “The Foreigner” we find a contemporary human crisis and search for a meaningful examples of life which takes us to the depths of human suffering and the existential agony. W.B. Yeats says in one of his poem about modern human life “we are nothing but weasels fighting in a whole”. Though a complex of mutually related human dilemmas—that of love versus hate, action versus inaction, and possessiveness versus renunciation—The Foreigner is, in the main, the study of “an uprooted young man living in the later half of the twentieth century”, looking concernedly for “moorings and meaning in his randomly drifting life” and contemplating helplessly on the meaningless part of it. In it, Arun Joshi searches the individual's anguished consciousness and the reasons which separated him from the whole social conventions.

Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist of The Foreigner is an existentialist luckless, rootless, and restless in a mad, bad, absurd world. He finds himself in the predicament of a foreigner—a man who does not belong anywhere—where so ever he may go. This sense of rootlessness and restlessness springs from his peculiar experiences of life, betrays his unsettled personality and vision toward life. His vision is coloured by his experiences, which are rooted in his essential foreignness. This foreignness is, in fact, an important existentialist trait in him. T.S. Eliot says

“The man has lost faith in God and, The man has lost faith in man.”

Sindi Oberoi is a man without roots, and so he feels lost, alien and alone wherever he goes. He fails to perceive any meaning or purpose in life. His nurture in his early life has made him an absolute foreigner. He has an English mother and an Indian father. When he was only four years old, his parents died in an air crash near Cairo. Wherever he remembers of them—“Strangers,” as he calls them—is “a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs”. With the death of his uncle, who brought him up in the absence of his parents, he has lost all his emotional attachment forever. His sense of alienation, however, is not limited to the geographical or physical plane alone; it has much deeper roots. His separation is not so much geographical or physical it results from his crisis of conscience. He cannot develop an emotional attachment to any place person, thing or place. He does not have roots anywhere in the world. The early experiences of life of Sidhi have left him confused. These bitter experiences does not provide meaning to his life. Denied of love, familial care and cultural roots, he has grown with a split in his personality, which has made him a lone rover. This is so
because his entire view of life, until he meets June, is coloured by his childhood deprivation of love from his parents, and by his two unfortunate sexual alliances in London. The bitter experiences of these episodes made him to realise the futility and sham of human relationships. In fact, Sindi's entire life is a search of human identity and these incidents are a part of it. He hopes that the philosophy of detachment and desirelessness will enable him to face the complications and challenges of his life. Therefore, he plans to remain detached and free for getting that this realization will take him to unstability, insecurity and unreality of life.

The sense of unstability of life makes Sindi feel that every social institution is an illusion and every life efforts a futile exercise. This attitude leaves him in utter separation and the social norms, make him go through the existentialist agony of experiencing the purposelessness and meaninglessness of social institutions.

Sindi's separation, it may be seen, springs from his failure to adjust himself to the realities of life. His philosophy of separation is not the result of a pragmatic approach to life, but of his search for "wrong things in wrong places". His cynicism and separation become away from involvement and commitment, and send him from crisis to crisis. His delusion of "steady tranquility of my being", and his pose of "living without desire", are badly shattered when his idealized hypothesis of non-involvement comes into clash with the reality of life during his passionate involvement with June Blyth. This crisis brings Sindi face to face with his stupidity, vanity, cowardice and hypocrisy. Her genuine affection and faith cause a crisis of conscience in Sindi. For the first time in his life, he is caught between two diametrically opposed pulls, those of attachment and detachment.

He gets this insight when he goes to the river after June's death, and watches the dawn breaking over the dark water and the sun rising. The primordial symbols of the hill, the river and the sun indicate that Sindi is on the right path of 'becoming.' The dawn breaking through the dark water symbolizes the breaking of the darkness within him.

He pretends to himself that he is thereby clear of involvement. Actually, Sindi wants to become a yogi without having the suitable preparation for becoming one. The serious flaw in Sindi's thinking is that he neglects his duty. Detachment in Sindi's case is another name for inaction. It is only when June dies that the true meaning of detachment as consisting in right action--action performed without any desire for its fruit--dawns upon him. Sindi Oberoi's case is akin to Paul Morel of *Sons and Lovers*. Just as Paul Morel's relationship with Miriam and Clara fails because of his insecurity, Sindi's relationship with Anna, Kathy and June fails because he cannot strike a relationship of complete union with any of the three women. Being an insecure man, he is always trying to preserve his identity, and is terribly afraid of being possessed.

Sindi is an escapist. It is in order to start his life anew that he longs to escape from America. Nigeria or India is his choice, and the flip of the coin decides in favour of India.
He comes to India hoping that he will get "a place to anchor on this lonely planet" , but his hopes are false. This action of Sindi's reminds us of Conrad's Jim, who goes out in search of a new world. Sindi soon realizes that his effort has been in vain, for he finds India no better place than America. "The Journey from Boston to India finally becomes a shift from alienation to arrival."

Sindi has an Indian ancestry; he inherits a genetic mystic drive: "I wanted to know the meaning of my life". When he comes to India, he encounters at Khemka's house a bronze figure of the dancing Shiva. The dancing Shiva represents a paradox: Shiva is both a destructive and a creative force. Sindi passes from a world of death into one of new life. His understanding deepens as he peeps into the world of the miserable, who are in rags. Human sufferings arouse his consciousness. He can now understand the real meaning of detachment. Sindi now understands that detachment does not mean escape or alienation, it means involvement, devotion, sacrifice--without desire. The novel *The Foreigner* ends on a suggestive note. The existential hero, the rover, the searcher for self human identity, who blunders into pride, greed, selfishness, withdrawal and cowardice, mistaking them for detachment, eventually comes to learn life's real meaning. For him, from Boston to Delhi turns out to be a journey from alienation to arrival, from selfishness to sacrifice, for a responsible only to himself to a becoming member of mankind. The central message of the novel comes from Thomas Gray's one of his poem , " The path of glory leads but to the grave " as it applies to the modern urban life.

The *Foreigner* becomes an example of Arun Joshi's moral vision of life. He recognizes the absurdity of human existence, beautifully invoked by him through the metaphor of the spider: "A spider aimlessly walked upside down from one corner to another, exploring his inverted universe ... lost hold of ceiling, hit the radiator and fell on the floor". But his vision of life does not border on pessimism or nihilism. Despite the "random absurdity of it all" (E192), Joshi finds that there is enough scope to one's existence, which one can do by holding on to life, and not yielding to it under pressure. This can be done by evolving a creative attitude to life, that is, by confronting life in the light of the new understanding acquired through an intricate and painful first-hand experience, instead of withdrawing from it on the basis of past failures. What Arun Joshi calls for is faith, paradoxically enough, held pragmatically-- legitimatizing a believing attitude. He recognizes the imperative need of man to have a "will to believe," which should support his search for self. Joshi aims to reconcile the requirement of detached action and the need of an active encounter with life. This reconciliation implies one's rising above indecision and performing what Sindi calls in the novel "right action," that is, action transcending the pull of the self, and directed toward making a better world. This mode of narration enables the novelist to lay bare the inner conflicts and dilemmas of the protagonist. The protagonist succeeds in projecting vividly his feverish inner struggle to get over his existential problems through his relations with others characters. The symbolism of seasons is also made use of in the novel. It is spring, when Sindi falls in love with June. After spring the rain and winter come, his love for June is "streaked with hatred and anger". Again, when Sindi reaches Boston and comes to know about the
death of June, it is a dark and rainy night. All this creates a suitable atmosphere and foreshadows the tone of the events that are to come at various points of development of the story.

## Conclusion

As a whole, *The Foreigner* is a remarkably well written novel of Arun Joshi. It has the distinction of being one of the few novels in Indo-English fiction which pointedly deal, in artistic terms with the pros and cons of the existentialist thought. Through this attempt, particularly for having created in it a hero who is out and out a searcher of human identity.

In short I define the meaning of life in a couple of lines –

“Life starts like an Eid (Happiness), and life ends like a Moharram (sufferings)

## WORKS CITED